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How to cite:

Colom, Anna (2021). Using WhatsApp for focus group discussions: ecological validity, inclusion and deliberation. Qualitative Research (Early Access).

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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1177/1468794120986074>

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Using WhatsApp for focus group discussions: ecological validity, inclusion and deliberation

Qualitative Research

1–16

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DOI: 10.1177/1468794120986074

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Abstract

WhatsApp's ubiquity in many people's everyday lives points at new possibilities for conducting online and mobile focus groups. Yet, research on the benefits and potential pitfalls of this is negligible. This paper offers new empirical insights from using the method as part of a digital ethnography with young activists in Western Kenya. The presence of WhatsApp in participants' everyday lives offers a context with high ecological validity. The paper suggests that this opens up new options for designing online focus groups, transcending the traditional categorisation between synchronous and asynchronous interactions and some limitations of both approaches. WhatsApp also offers opportunities for creating more inclusive group discussions. Using discourse analysis of the WhatsApp focus group, the paper also finds that this familiarity and inclusivity affords the potential for group deliberation, which can be particularly valuable in participatory research.

Keywords

WhatsApp, Online focus groups, Focus Group Discussions, Online methods, Mobile methods, Qualitative methods, Deliberative discussions, Synchronicity, Asynchronicity, Ecological validity

Introduction

From the turn of the century, the growing interactive affordances of the Internet opened up new possibilities for online research. In addition to the emergence of a new horizon for online research methodology – see, for example, Blank's chapter on big data and the 'qualitative data revolution' (Blank, 2016: 867) – more traditional qualitative methods, such as interviews, observation or focus groups, have been adapted into online equivalents (Boydell et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2012). Internet technologies can easily be adapted for social research, but the ongoing developments in technology

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and the practices they open up requires an ongoing reflexive approach from researchers on the methodology (Hooley et al., 2012).

This paper builds on the literature on qualitative research methods that has studied online or virtual focus groups and adds new methodological considerations pertinent to the affordances of mobile instant messaging and WhatsApp specifically. WhatsApp is the most used instant messaging app globally¹ and its potential as a research tool deserves attention.

Affordances are understood as possibilities offered, although not determined, by artefacts or technologies. Whether these possibilities are actioned depends on the context in which the given technology is used and interpreted (Hutchby, 2001; Roberts, 2017; Zheng and Yu, 2016). This paper draws on the empirical evidence of a focus group on WhatsApp that I conducted with young activists in Western Kenya as part of a broader digital ethnography study. Its conclusions are to be considered as possibilities for using WhatsApp in other contexts rather than prescriptive guidelines.

The paper starts by situating WhatsApp in the literature on focus group methodology to show its unexplored potential. It then presents the digital ethnography study in which the method was used. It proceeds to make the case for the following key insights. First, it shows how WhatsApp's ecological validity can be harnessed by adapting the focus group duration to people's daily routines, which results in a combination of synchronicity and asynchronicity that transcends the limitations of both approaches. Second, it presents WhatsApp's affordances for inclusive discussions. Finally, and following a discourse analytic approach, it concludes that WhatsApp focus groups offer potential for deliberation, which can be particularly useful in more participatory research approaches. The paper also highlights considerations related to ethics and recruitment.

WhatsApp's untapped potential for qualitative research

WhatsApp is available on Android, iOS or KaiOS smartphones and is used by over 1 billion people across 180 countries. It allows instant one-to-one or group sharing of text and voice messages, links, images, videos and other files. It also allows voice and video calls. All of these services are at no additional financial cost other than the cost of internet access (mobile data or Wi-Fi). It has a desktop version called WhatsApp Web, which can be used by pairing the computer with the phone by scanning a QR code. WhatsApp also includes 'social information' (Church and De Oliveira, 2013: 353), which indicates, for example, when someone is online or typing. The application also indicates when the recipient has received the message or when they have read it, unless the user has disabled this feature to manage how much information about their WhatsApp activity is available.

WhatsApp has been covered in the academic literature across many disciplines largely as an object of study rather than a research method. For example, it has been studied as a communication space between health professionals or between health professionals and patients that can improve the efficiency of health practice (Ganasgeran et al., 2017). It has similarly been studied as a teaching and learning method (Madge et al., 2019) as a space in social movements (Treré, 2020), in gender and technology literature (Abubakar and Dasuki, 2018) or as a tool for monitoring and accountability in development and humanitarian sectors (Nedungadi et al., 2018). It is also generating a body of literature in

linguistics for its particular use of language (Pérez-Sabater, 2015). The methods used in these studies include, among others, questionnaires, analysis of WhatsApp chats and face-to-face focus groups. However, despite WhatsApp being studied for its communicative value, its use as a tool for online focus group discussions is practically non-existent in the identified literature. Research using WhatsApp for one-to-one interviews is also limited. Mare used WhatsApp as a complement to the in-depth interviews that the author conducted on Facebook in Zimbabwe and South Africa (Mare, 2017) and a study by Gibson covered the author's experience conducting interviews on WhatsApp with young people in New Zealand (Gibson, 2020).

During the first decade of the century, academic research on online focus groups can largely be found in health research. Stewart and Williams (2005) researched online focus groups drawing on Stewart's work using email threads and William's work using 3D graphical environments. These two examples allowed Stewart and Williams to observe the differences between asynchronous focus groups, typical of email-based distribution lists or 'web boards', and synchronous focus groups, a more obvious online equivalent to face-to-face group discussions as the conversation happens in real time. These different options showed the new possibilities that technology opened when established methods were brought into the virtual world: 'Temporal and spatial flexibility, facilitated by computer networks, can be used to the advantage of the researcher and those researched' (2005: 413).

This temporal and spatial flexibility has been a recurrent theme in the study of online or virtual focus groups. The literature identified largely covers three key aspects related to this flexibility: synchronicity vs asynchronicity, ecological validity and the potential for inclusive conversations.

In relation to synchronicity and asynchronicity, Graffigna and Bosio used a mixed approach and included face-to-face focus groups, synchronous one-hour online chats, asynchronous three-day online forums and a combination of the last two (a three-day forum with a one-hour chat on the second day). They concluded that, although the conversation themes were common across all four forms of group discussion, each showed 'peculiar characteristics, both in terms of conversational exchange patterns and in terms of discourse structure' (2006: 69).

With respect to the potential ecological validity, Fox et al. found that conducting the online focus group in a virtual space made it more familiar to their participants (2007), even when the chat room in which the online discussion took place was created for the purpose of the research. Hinchcliffe and Gavin also referred to the ecological validity of Instant Messenger (IM) in 2009 when used for online interviewing with university students in the United Kingdom (UK). The authors argued that IM enhanced the ecological validity of the research because it was an important part of student life (2009). More recently, the importance of this familiarity has also been emphasised by Skelton et al. in their use of Facebook for focus group discussions with mothers who were already part of a Facebook group (2018). The proximity is enhanced through the use of mobile communication technologies. Mobile research can bring the researcher "closer" to the participant's environment (Boase and Humphreys, 2018).

In relation to the potential for inclusion, the literature on has also emphasised the use of online focus groups to study hard-to-reach populations and for exploring sensitive

topics in a less threatening space (Boydell et al., 2014). Some studies found participants appreciated the relative perception of anonymity compared to embodied interactions during the online discussions, which can encourage engagement, confidence and honesty (Hinchcliffe and Gavin, 2009) and which can erase concerns related to class and appearance and result into an equalising and disinhibiting effect during the conversation (Boydell et al., 2014; Stewart and Williams, 2005; Williams et al., 2012). Others have highlighted it is more challenging to build rapport in online settings although views on this are mixed (Gibson, 2020; Jowett et al., 2011) and there are also mixed views on whether the loss of non-verbal cues in text-based messaging is a disadvantage (Hinchcliffe and Gavin, 2009).

The temporal flexibility of discussions, the ecological validity and the potential for inclusion identified in the literature on online focus groups stem from the proximity of the research tool to participants' lives and I argue these are therefore central considerations when using WhatsApp. This paper develops these considerations using empirical data from a digital ethnography study in Kenya and finds its unexplored potential.

The study: digital ethnography into young activists in Western Kenya

This study is part of a wider research I undertook to understand how WhatsApp mediates the citizenship capabilities of young people in Western Kenya. My motivation was to explore how initiatives to support civic engagement through digital technologies could improve its transformational potential. I followed an intersectional feminist approach to shed light on invisibilised realities. The methodology recognises the power imbalances and contradictions inherent in me being an European researcher in Kenya. In addition to focusing on language, representation and an 'ethics of relationship' (Preissle and Han, 2012: 19), it also includes a reflexivity approach.

This article, however, focuses only on my experience doing a focus group discussion on WhatsApp as part of this broader research. Participants were part of a group of young people aged 18 to 35 living across the seven electoral constituencies in Busia county in Western Kenya. They were being trained and supported by a Kenyan civil society organisation on civic participation, understanding their rights under the constitution, and government accountability. In turn, they were training and supporting peers in their respective communities. To enable communication among themselves, the young activists set up a WhatsApp group. Many were also part of other WhatsApp groups for civic engagement in their constituencies and members of other groups related to family, work or for mutual aid initiatives.²

As part of the broader study, I observed the group interactions both in its own WhatsApp group and also in the face-to-face meetings. I also interviewed in person most of its members, as well as some of their peers in their relevant constituencies. This helped to establish a rapport and a shared understanding of everyone's positionality. Since the group was already using WhatsApp to communicate and plan activities, and since this was also the app that was used the most according to the one-to-one interviews, I thought it would be valuable to use WhatsApp for a focus group to discuss the research topics in a group setting and an online space that is familiar to participants. In line with the reflexivity approach

of the methodology, the study also included a fieldwork diary, which was also valuable in documenting my experiences and immediate reflections as I was designing, recruiting for and conducting the focus group discussion.

The insights of this paper result from the analysis of the focus group discussion. In particular, thematic analysis of the questions related to participants' views on WhatsApp as a communication platform and discourse analysis of the focus group discussion to explore its deliberative nature. The analyses were done in Nvivo.

The WhatsApp focus group: methodological and practical considerations

In addition to being a familiar space that the group was already using, WhatsApp offered a practical solution for this study both in terms of cost and the possibility to include more people. Participants were spread across different constituencies and organising the logistics for them to gather in the same physical space would have been costly. It could also have added a burden on those wishing to take part if this meant stopping work, studies or arranging for childcare, for example. Although traditional face-to-face groups tend to not be longer than two hours (Liamputtong, 2011), participation would have practically required the whole day for those having to travel far. The group met face-to-face occasionally as part of their training and activism, but time was precious during these offline meetings as there was much content for the group and the civil society organisation that trained them to discuss. Consequently, it did not feel appropriate to organise a focus group during those days. Respecting participants' time and spaces for discussion was particularly important considering my positionality as a Western researcher and the power imbalances that this carries. I was, therefore, aware and reflexive of the need to minimise any burden on participants. Doing an online focus group seemed to be a more suitable approach.

For the method to be suitable, however, it also had to be mobile. It was rare for the young activists to own a laptop or computer, but most owned a smartphone and used WhatsApp on a daily basis. In addition, then, it also felt more ethical to use the participants' own space of communication (see also Williams et al., 2012). As I will argue, this familiarity has implications for the way participants engaged and communicated during the focus group discussion, including the use of languages. To support this point, all quotes from participants included in this article are kept as typed in the group discussion.

Recruitment, set-up and ethics

I designed the focus group to last for a day to make the most of WhatsApp's ubiquity and lower the burden of participating. This should make it a convenient exercise for participants as they could come in and out of the discussion, taking part both in more instant interactions or catching up on previous questions with more reflective answers. Leaving the group open for longer could have diffused attention and focus, but it may be considered by other research more interested in long-term or participatory engagements. I informed participants that the group would be closed after 24 hours from the start of the discussion, so that they could add final reflections after the discussion ended. However,

no specific end time was given a priori for the discussion itself as I needed to see how the conversation and the level of interest developed during the day.

The reconfiguration of time and space boundaries brought about by social media and instant messaging has implications for ethics processes. This is one major reason why the importance of a dialogic and recursive approach has been emphasised in the field of online research ethics (Barbosa and Milan, 2019; Franzke et al., 2020).

Once I decided to use WhatsApp as the online space for conducting a focus group discussion, I sent a message in the existing WhatsApp groups in which I was already a member as an observer. The message explained that I was planning to have a focus group on a certain date and that those interested in taking part could either message me privately or send a missed call, so that I could then be in touch with more details. The option of the missed call was given because using mobile data or sending an SMS was an important expense for some of the potential participants. I also informed them that their mobile data would be paid for. As three of the potential participants had very intermittent access to WhatsApp, I had also sent them this information via SMS. A total of 10 participants gave informed consent and took part in the focus group discussion, five men and five women (gender was self-identified by those who had also taken part in one-to-one interviews and completed a participant details form).

The one-to-one communication for consent was done via WhatsApp for most of the participants, but SMS and phone calls were used for others whose online access was intermittent. The process included four main categories of information: (1) time, duration and set-up process; (2) my responsibilities on their privacy and data protection, (3) their responsibilities towards myself and other participants on privacy and data protection and (4) an emphasis on the risks related to privacy associated with using WhatsApp.

These ethical considerations were mentioned again in the group setting, once the WhatsApp group for the focus group discussion had been set up. They were then repeated twice during the day at the points when I added two participants to the discussion (as informed consent for two of them was only obtained after the group had started). The proximity of WhatsApp to participants' daily lives blurs the time and space boundaries in which the focus group takes place but this requires the ethics process to also be adaptable both in the channels and times in which it is conducted.

This recursive approach helped to remind participants of their ethical responsibilities towards the group. WhatsApp conversations are end-to-end encrypted, but the researcher cannot control the extent to which the conversation is kept private in participants' phones. In addition, phone numbers are identifiable in WhatsApp conversations. It was therefore important to emphasise, before and after consent, the collective responsibility on privacy and the risks that come with it. The discussion did not cover topics that participants were not already discussing publicly in offline events as well as in their own WhatsApp group but others doing research on more sensitive topics or with participants who do not know each other will need to consider any additional risks.

Harnessing the ecological validity of doing focus groups in WhatsApp

As stated earlier, its proximity to people's daily lives was a central consideration for using WhatsApp for a focus group discussion, which was designed to last for a day to fit within

participants daily activities. The discussion guide included a total of seven main topic areas which I spread throughout the day to give enough room for topics to be discussed in depth without excluding participants who were busy at the time a topic was discussed. This also provided a sense of structure, necessary when combining instant and more asynchronous discussions. Three of the main topics were posed from 8.30 hrs to 14:00 hrs and the remaining four from 14:00 hrs to 19:30 hrs. In addition, there were gaps throughout, meaning that no questions or probing was done during these gaps, to allow participants to add further reflections or catch up on discussions they may have missed. These gaps included an hour and a half over lunch time. I would suggest these gaps in the chat and make clear when they would start and end to avoid confusion over ‘silences’. When a topic was presented, it was numbered and written in bold font. This allowed to signpost the different topics throughout the day, hence making it easier for those who had been off to catch up. These choices served to establish a pace that helped everyone to be clear on what was being discussed or to identify where to pick up the conversation.

Synchronous interactions

This structure helped to maintain synchronous discussions within topics while also accommodating asynchronous interactions throughout the day.

Fox et al. (2007) studied synchronous online focus groups using a bespoke online forum hosted by their university to engage with young people. They found real-time discussion allowed for a dynamic and engaging conversation. They also found that the complexity of real-time written interactions ‘can result in a chaotic transcript, characterized by real-time “threading”’ which they argue could pose a challenge for researchers’ (p. 542).

In WhatsApp, this complexity can be managed through the function that allows to click on the comment one is responding to before starting to type. In doing this, WhatsApp makes the threading visible when the response is sent, making the conversation more manageable. During the focus group discussion, participants would refer explicitly to specific previous comments if they considered it was important to clarify that their response was in reference to those. However, not everyone used this function. This required a more complex interpretation exercise of interactions when multiple people were typing at the same time. In addition, this functional affordance is lost when the WhatsApp conversation is exported into a text edit file. It is therefore not available at the time of analysis unless screenshots of the conversation or notes have been taken to support the interpretation process.

During synchronous phases, the pace of turn-taking was fast and responses were shorter. Pérez-Sabater finds that word and sentence length in WhatsApp is shorter than the written language average in a study covering conversations in English, Catalan and Spanish (Pérez-Sabater, 2015). The particular use of language has been another important aspect in the study of online focus group discussions. For example, Greenfield and Subrahmanyam (2003) used conversation analysis to explore how participants in a web chat create a language register to adapt to the new digital environment. Fox et al. (2007: 546) concluded that synchronous online chats have its own ‘unique linguistic characteristics’ and that this offered a new area of study for communication with implications in qualitative research. In addition, emojis, punctuation and intentional misspelling can be

used to communicate non-verbal language (Abrams and Gaiser, 2016; Jowett et al., 2011; Liamputtong, 2011). As the group facilitator, I used smiling emojis to communicate that the group discussion was a friendly space for discussion. I also used the 'ok' emoji in alternation with the words 'thank you' or the more explicit 'I am following' to indicate I was "listening". The lack of non-verbal cues, as well as the shorter sentences during synchronous phases, meant that pauses could be interpreted as a dwindling down of interaction so I found myself using these cues, both written or through emojis, to signal that the conversation was alive. Like Gibson, I also found that it was important to balance these 'listening responses' with silences so that participants did not feel the need stop typing if I interjected to show I was listening (Gibson, 2020: 9). Emojis were also used by participants for a variety of reasons, such as to show agreement (*'The idea is ok and support it 100'*), to tone down potentially uncomfortable statements, or to show disapproval: *'Its hard as an African Woman to Actively engage in Community activities because of perception that you will be seen by other Men 😊'*. Williams et al. (2012) argue that this informal representation of written language allows for emotional nuances to be more systematically interpreted and analysed compared to the implicit cues in spoken communication.

The potentially shorter sentences that might be typical of WhatsApp can give the impression of a shallow conversation when compared to transcripts from traditional focus group discussions. However, the various ways in which non-verbal cues can be represented offer new ways to interpret people's views and interactions. In the interviews done in WhatsApp, Gibson found the digital transcripts to be shorter than face-to-face interviews but denser (Gibson, 2020). Some studies have found that synchronous online focus groups can offer a quality of data comparable to traditional focus groups (Boydell et al., 2014), but I found the value of using WhatsApp for a focus group discussion to be in the possibility for the conversation to take place in a platform and genre that the participants are familiarised with. Based on this, then, researchers should approach these type of transcripts in the context of the communication style natural of WhatsApp interactions, rather than in comparison to face-to-face focus group discussions.

Asynchronous interactions

Asynchronous group discussions can be more accommodating of participants' personal circumstances, be it busy schedules, digital literacy, cognitive or physical impairment or internet connection (Hinchcliffe and Gavin, 2009; Hooley et al., 2012; Nilsson et al., 2014; Wilkerson et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2012). During the focus group, as I introduced a different topic of discussion, I used numbering and bold font. The bold font was intended to make it easier to identify new topics when scrolling up and down. The numbering allowed participants to know how many new topics had been introduced since they had been inactive. Some used the same numbering in their answers to indicate the question they were referring to: *'Good morning, Am sorry for late reply, I have been engaged (. . .) *Topic 1* The engagement through the WhatsApp has been of great value as I have reached to the social class of youths who are only accessible through such platforms. *Topic 2* They are not disadvantaged (. . .)'*. Others asked where they should start: *'Hi guys. Sorry I've joined u late. The discussion is quite impressive. Nianzie wapi sasa'*.³

Unlike the potentially more spontaneous and rapid nature of synchronous chats, asynchronous group discussions have been valued in the literature for allowing participants time to reflect on their responses (Abrams and Gaiser, 2016; Skelton et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2012). In the WhatsApp focus group, the answers from those who were coming into the discussion after a break tended to include longer sentences. For example, this participant wrote: *'Sorry for the delay once again'* and followed with an intervention of three paragraphs that started like this: *'This is my take on this: It is worthy noting that many youths volunteer when it comes to civic engagement. However, most young people. . .'* The choice of words and use of subordinate clauses already in this short excerpt is indicative of the more reflective answer and contrasts with the shorter synchronous interactions in the same group discussion.

WhatsApp and inclusive conversations

WhatsApp was described as a practical and convenient communication space by participants themselves in the context of their own activism: *'It is economical to reach a good number of individuals (especially the target group) without necessarily having to look for them in person. This is economically viable and it saves time.'*⁴ Another participant wrote during the group discussion: *'(. . .) we are in the information age, in what's app thousands of views can be collected in a minutes and the contribution is in real time.'* Another participant referred more explicitly to his experience of taking part in the group discussion: *'Though I've been on off (katika harakati za kutafta unga), I must admit that I've enjoyed'*⁵

Inclusion has so far been defined here in terms of access and the possibility of taking part regardless of everyone's personal daily activities. However, there is also a case for using WhatsApp for more inclusive conversations. This type of inclusivity, understood as active engagement, has been another common theme among those studying online focus groups because of the relative anonymity or disembodied experience facilitated by online discussions. In this case, participants knew each other and this made the discussion familiar already. Beyond anonymity, though, an online discussion offers a disembodied experience that has the potential to overcome the fear of 'speaking up'. Participants referred to this when discussing the value of using WhatsApp for their activism: *'In WhatsApp, once you have a view it can be removed in any way you have presented it without fear or any body intimidating you as opposed to open meetings where old people tend to dilute the efforts of the youth contributing.'* Another participant wrote: *'Everyone has the liberty to air their views and thoughts with no fear resulting from a one on one engagement.'* This idea of freedom when communicating via WhatsApp was also mentioned during one-to-one interviews conducted in the study. A participant referred to the value of WhatsApp not only over face-to-face communication but also over SMS communication: *'(. . .) it's been easier to communicate than when you communicate manually, or, rather when you just use calls and SMS. It has been easy because we are together and everyone can speak. . . is a free space in that, anyone, you can type at the same time, you can deliver messages, a message, as the other person delivers.'*

As I was conducting the group discussion, I noticed that women seemed to be more proactive in sharing their opinions than they had been in face-to-face meetings in which

I had been an observer as part of the broader ethnographic study. In the WhatsApp focus group discussion, women's participation accounted for 53% of the entries whereas men accounted for 47%. In their study on social media and youth in Kenya, Ndlela and Mulwo found similar evidence on the safety and freedom associated with online communication even when participants knew each other: 'It is evident from such experiences that the physical distance created by social media interactions offers a comfortable environment in which participants find it easier to discuss topics that they may feel uncomfortable discussing in face-to-face interactions' (Ndlela and Mulwo, 2017: 287).

I used English to facilitate the group discussion, which is also the language that the group mostly used in their own WhatsApp discussions. However, during the focus group there were some instances of multilingual writing too, which I interpreted as evidence of the inclusive nature of the space for participants: '*Make them change their perception and realized that vijana ndio viongozi Wa sasa na siyo kesho as perceived.*'⁶ If there was an expression I did not understand, I could check for a reliable translation elsewhere without this interrupting the conversation, something that would not be possible during a face-to-face discussion. Deumert refers to text-messaging in Africa (including SMS, instant messaging and microblogging apps like Twitter) as a new written genre and notes the presence of 'multilingual writing', or multiple languages being used in one text. Deumert (2017: 1) argues that this offers 'new ways of writing locally as well as shaping a digitally-mediated pan-African voice that draws on global strategies as well as local meaning'. As an European researcher in Kenya, I was particularly aware of power dynamics, language and representation during the research process. Using a medium that is perceived as familiar and free in a communication genre that is part of the participants' daily lives was therefore also important from this point of view. In exploring the use of WhatsApp for interviews, Gibson also refers to the importance of using methods where participants can feel freer and experience more comfort and control for meaningful engagement and to challenge power relations between researcher and participant (Gibson, 2020).

WhatsApp focus groups as spaces for deliberation

Asynchronous research allows for a 'greater co-research process' as not only the participant can reflect on and clarify their answers but also the researcher has time for reflection and clarification (Williams et al., 2012: 375). In my case, this space for reflection throughout the day helped me think about the nature of the discussion that was taking place and the potential of the WhatsApp discussion for group deliberation and less extractive types of research.

The WhatsApp group discussion was planned with the intention to follow up on and clarify some interesting insights that had emerged in the study so far. However, as the day progressed, I started to realise that the discussion was potentially working as a space for group reflexion and deliberation, which was relevant to the participants process of bonding as an already organised group working together to mobilise their communities on civic engagement.

In their study of deliberation in online groups, Black et al. define deliberative discussion as 'decision-oriented conversations in which a group weighs pros and cons of different options, articulates core values, and makes choices in a way that is respectful,

egalitarian, and open' (Black et al., 2011: 597). I used discourse analysis and identified the following discursive patterns: the use of 'I' versus 'we', articulation of values – individually or as a group – respect for other opinions, agreement/corroboratorion, asking others for clarification, further developing someone else's comment, justifying an argument or opinion, weighting pros and cons, suggesting a way forward and decision-making.

The use of 'we' versus 'I'

Participants used 'we' – and related terms such as 'our' or 'us' – to refer to their identity as an activist group (*'Because we don't want them to miss out, we recommend those who have WhatsApp to share the information with others . . .'*) and as citizens with a common context and past (*'I believe we share with other to do away with corruption'*). Participants used 'I' when adding a personal reflection or to communicate personal objectives (*'I hope to achieve that the memorandum we took to county assembly on reproductive health budget increase be cooperated in the CFSP. . .'*) or to agree and disagree with others.

Creating common ground

The use of singular and plural first-person during the group discussion is also related to other discursive patterns, such as the articulation of values – individually or as a group. The use of 'we' helped to set common values and strategies whereas the use of 'I' helped to articulate values in a way that was respectful of other people's opinions. Participants were making their own views visible while implicitly and explicitly acknowledging that not everyone might agree: *'In my opinion, helping others is a virtue and it's something anyone should do but constitutionally it's not a role it's just an act of kindness and it's done out of good will . . . my opinion 😊'*. The use of the first-person singular is therefore also related to 'respect for other opinions' as a discursive pattern. For Black et al., in addition to functional components such as creating 'an information base' and prioritising values, 'demonstrating respect for each other' is a social component of deliberation (2011: 598). Other discursive patterns have been identified that helped to achieve this shared understanding in a respectful manner. For example, 'justifying an argument or opinion' was common through the use of words such as 'because', 'since', 'hence' or 'so' among others: *'Youths form a greater margin in the communities and they are the majority of the beneficiaries hence they need to be in limelight on their roles and duties in national building and accountability.'* Similarly, it was common for participants to further 'develop someone else's point', to show 'agreement/corroboratorion' and, in some instances, 'asking others for clarification'.

The discussion enabled the visibility of different views in the group and participants interactions helped to create a common ground of understanding in a cautious respectful manner. 'Suggesting a way forward' was another discursive pattern that demonstrates the deliberative value of the group discussion. This was done by suggesting practical next steps (*'We should urge and encourage youth on what app to share what they have with others. Also we need ta make use of exasisting structure in the community'*), highlighting an existing need, or stating a common purpose (*'I believe those [who] have civil education (. . .) pushed the government, so we are watching them lead 2 improvement'*). There were also

instances of ‘weighting pros and cons’ (*‘it has both positive and negative impact depending on what one chooses to emulate’*).

The design of the discussion guide did not lend itself to the group making final decisions but the discussion helped to set a common ground (*‘Its more Impressive that my thoughts have been represented here thanks to all.’*) and to indicate potential ways forward for the group, suggesting it was valuable to participants as a space for group deliberation.

Although it needs to be interpreted in the context of this study, among participants who knew each other and shared a common purpose, this analysis suggests that WhatsApp focus group discussions can facilitate deliberative practices. This can be especially the case in research where deliberation is particularly valuable, such as participatory, action and critical reflection research because the discussion can be facilitated in ways that more fundamentally serve the objectives of the participants. In a study on WhatsApp groups as digital publics in Kenya, Omanga highlighted the potential of these groups for deliberation in Kenyan politics and concluded that more research is needed to understand how this deliberation can shape political action (Omanga, 2018). From a research methods perspective, this paper finds that WhatsApp focus group discussions offer a deliberative potential, but more research is also needed particularly on the use of WhatsApp group discussions in participatory research methodologies.

Discussion

This study harnessed WhatsApp’s ubiquity in people’s daily lives and communicative habits to design a one-day focus group discussion with young activists. This atypical duration enabled the inclusion of a wide range of personal circumstances and resulted in a combination of synchronous and asynchronous interactions that transcends the limitations described in the online focus groups literature of using either approach in isolation. The functional affordances of WhatsApp helped to manage this approach. For example, using bold font and numbering when introducing a new question helped to signpost the discussion so that participants catching up after a break could identify the different topics while scrolling up and down. As for the synchronous exchanges, often fast-paced, the function in WhatsApp to reference the comment that one is responding to helped to manage conversation threading, although this was not always used and the visual reference is lost when the chat is exported as a .txt file, therefore requiring the researcher to anticipate the analysis of multiple synchronous interactions.

In addition, the method enabled inclusivity through the communication affordances of WhatsApp as a disembodied medium seen by participants themselves as a familiar and free space that helps to overcome the fear of speaking up. Instant messaging communication has also been found to be a genre that allows the use of multiple languages and the representation of non-verbal cues in participants’ own terms, which in this study helped to disrupt unequal power relations between participants and myself as an European researcher. Participants would indeed mix Kiswahili, informal expressions and emojis in their interactions, which can also be interpreted more systematically by the researcher in a text-based discussion.

Finally, discourse analysis suggested that the WhatsApp group discussion enabled deliberation among participants. Although many factors may play a role in providing a

deliberative space, such as the facilitator and the objective of the discussion, I have argued in this paper that WhatsApp's ecological validity and communication affordances as a disembodied space can support more deliberative interactions. This has to be understood in the context of the study, with a group of people who were already working together as activists and shared a common goal. However, the group discussion was designed by the researcher to answer specific research questions. This suggests that using WhatsApp can offer even greater deliberative potential if discussions are facilitated in the context of participatory research approaches where power and decision-making is more fundamentally intended to be in the hands of participants.

Despite these benefits, researchers considering WhatsApp need to be mindful of digital inequalities. In the context of the broader digital ethnography that this focus group was part of, some of the young people did not have a smartphone or had to use their partner's. Others could not always afford data or access Wi-Fi, so they would be offline for relatively long periods. Others lived in areas where the network was so weak that their online access was very intermittent. This was less so the case for the core group of activists engaged in the focus group discussion and the approach to recruiting, designing and conducting the focus group took these realities into account, by, for example, covering the data costs and calling participants to go through informed consent. Using WhatsApp was still a practical and inclusive option for this specific group of participants but others thinking about using this approach need to carefully consider the communication ecosystem and the realities of potential participants.

WhatsApp offers the option of using photos, videos, voice messages and various file types which could help communicate with persons with difficulty in typing or reading or might be relevant for other research. However, different mediums will add new layers of complexity in the dynamics of the group discussion or may also challenge some of the advantages of the disembodied experience of text-based communication. The use of voice messages or other types of media in WhatsApp focus group discussions has not been attempted or explored in this study and would benefit from further research.

Finally, as a mobile method, using WhatsApp requires careful attention to ethics. A dialogical and recursive approach was used in this study to emphasise the risks, such as visibility of phone numbers, and the collective responsibility for privacy. However, other options might be more suitable if the group discussion is to be organised for more sensitive topics or with participants who do not know each other.

Conclusion

As the most used instant messaging application in the world, WhatsApp's ubiquity in many people's lives offers new avenues for qualitative research. Yet, evidence on its potential is limited. This paper has shared some lessons and benefits of using WhatsApp for online and mobile focus group discussions drawing on a digital ethnography with young activists in Western Kenya. Beyond a practical way of overcoming issues of distance and cost, I have argued that WhatsApp offers high ecological validity by bringing group discussions closer to participants' habitual spaces of communication. I have argued how in this study this opened possibilities for more inclusive and equalising discussions as well as for new approaches to online research that combine both synchronous and

asynchronous discussions and harness the advantages of both. Finally, the study also finds WhatsApp can enable deliberative discussions, which can be particularly valuable in participatory action research. Yet, careful consideration is needed when deciding on using WhatsApp, as these affordances will not apply to all contexts, participants or topics.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks the members of the Kenyan organisation Siasa Place for allowing access to their networks in Western Kenya and to all the research participants who took part. The author also thanks Dr Rose Capdevila, Dr Charlotte Cross, Dr Agnes Czajka and Dr Sarah Jane Mukherjee for the support and advice, and to the reviewers for the constructive feedback in improving this paper.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The author is supported by the Economic and Social Research Council Grand Union Doctoral Training Partnership.

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Notes

1. As of January 2018, WhatsApp had approximately 1,300 million users, making it the top messaging app in the world and the second mobile app based on monthly active users (only topped by Facebook). *Source*: We Are Social 2018 (accessed on 17 September 2019). Available at: <https://www.slideshare.net/wearesocial/digital-in-2018-global-overview-86860338>
2. These initiatives are widespread and known in Kenya as ‘chamas’. They are often informal cooperatives where members pool savings to help each other (Njeri Kinyanjui, 2019).
3. Translation: ‘where should I start?’
4. Although most participant quotes result from the analysis of the focus group discussion itself, one-to-one interviews have also informed the paper.
5. Translation: ‘hustle and bustle of looking for money’.
6. Translation: ‘youth are the leaders of today not tomorrow’.

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Author biography

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